Boycott of Salvadoran coffee

BOYCOTTS WHICH succeed appeal to our sense of justice. We can make a difference by the choices we make in spending our consumer dollars.

As general counsel to the United Farm Workers in the late 1960s and the 1970s, I saw the grape boycott work, resulting in contracts with table grape growers. That boycott was initiated in late 1967 and took almost three years to bear fruit. The boycott of South African products has also taken years.

The Salvadoran coffee boycott, initiated by Neighbor to Neighbor, has produced a strong reaction after only six months and is already a force for peace in El Salvador.

Neighbor to Neighbor is a national citizen organization dedicated to social and economic justice both at home and abroad. For the past six years Neighbor to Neighbor has focused its attention on Central America. Its goal is simply that our foreign policy reflect basic American values of fairness, justice, equality and liberty.

AMERICAN POLICY in El Salvador is a miserable betrayal of our basic values. Over 4 billion of our tax dollars have helped to fund the extreme right wing which rules El Salvador. We have helped to fund a bloody regime which uses military death squads to harass, torture and murder its own people.

Over the past 10 years over 70,000 have died in a civil war which can be won by neither the government nor the insurgent FMLN. In addition to U.S. tax dollars, Salvadoran taxes on coffee exports are a major source of funding for the repressive government. Coffee is the principal export of El Salvador, and the United States imports 50 percent of its annual $400 million crop.

Last fall after a military death squad, an elite unit trained by United States advisers, murdered six Jesuit priests and two women witnesses, Neighbor to Neighbor called a boycott of all Salvadoran coffee products and brands which use such products.

The current focus of the boycott in the east is Folgers Coffee and in the west both Folgers and Hills Brothers. The boycott will continue until a peaceful settlement is negotiated in El Salvador where talks are currently being held.

The boycott has caused quite a stir in the United States and in El Salvador. Individual longshoremen have refused to unload Salvadoran coffee as a matter of conscience, and West Coast ports constituting about 25 percent of the market are now closed.

In Boston, the CBS television station ran a Neighbor to Neighbor ad urging consumers to boycott Folgers. Folgers' parent company, Procter & Gamble, then yanked $1 million worth of its own ads from the station, provoking a nationwide debate on the free speech implications of such use of corporate economic muscle. Many college campuses have cleared Salvadoran coffee from their dining halls. National church groups, labor unions, and congressional leaders have endorsed the boycott. Picketing of chain stores has begun in major cities including Boston, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Last June, two chain stores in New York City, Gristedes and Red Apple, agreed not to buy Folgers for 60 days. In recent weeks El Salvador's right wing press has condemned the boycott in banner headlines, a measure of its economic impact.

This boycott offers American consumers a unique opportunity not only to pressure the government of El Salvador to negotiate an end to the bloody civil war but also to organize effectively to pressure Congress and the Bush administration to change a brutal, stupid and anachronistic policy. By making the tragedy of El Salvador the economic problem of corporate America, the boycott brings new pressures to bear on our own government. New voices are now being heard in the halls of Congress, in the State Department and at the White House as corporate leaders react to boycott heat. For example on May 23, Edwin Artzt, chief executive officer of Procter & Gamble, wrote to Sen. Kennedy complaining about boycott tactics. Significantly Artzt sent copies of his letter to Secretary of State James Baker and to White House Chief of Staff, John Sununu.

Given this reaction at the highest levels, it is clear that the coffee boycott is working. Consumers can make a difference now by boycotting all Salvadoran coffee products including Folgers and Hills Brothers, thus telling the Bush administration, the Congress and the Salvadoran right wing that it's time for peace.